

VZCZCXRO1917
PP RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1143 0921447
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 021447Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0515
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BAGHDAD 001143

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [SCUL](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: Embassy-sponsored "Women for a Unified Iraq" Luncheon Draws Over 100 Activists

1.(U) SUMMARY: On March 25, the US and UK Embassies co-hosted a luncheon to honor International Women's Day (March 8) and International Women's History Month (March). Over 100 Iraqi political and civil society leaders, both male and female, attended the luncheon, which included speeches by Ambassador Khalilzad, UK DCM Matthew Lodge, and Minister of State for Women's Affairs Fatin Abd al-Rahman. USAID Director Bambi Arellano announced a PAS small grant competition emphasizing projects focusing on educational and economic development opportunities for women and children. Attendees included parliamentarians, ministers, NGO leaders, local government representatives and professional civil service employees. END SUMMARY.

Reactions

(U) MAJ Angham Ahmed, the highest ranking woman in the Iraqi military said the event was the first time she was able to reach out to parliamentarians and other senior Iraqi officials. MAJ Angham, in full military uniform, said that she was amazed by how interested the ministers and CoR members were in her experiences and noted that this hadn't been the case in the past. She left the event with meetings set up the following week to further discuss her ideas about recruitment of women and equal access to educational and training opportunities in the military.

(U) Women's rights activist and Al-Amal NGO leader Hanaa Edwar said that the NGO community is well aware that the international funding for NGOs is "drying up." She thanked the Embassy for holding this event, noting, "while the funds may be diminishing, it's good to see that your support is not!" She said that the most positive aspect of the gathering was the opportunity for NGOs to mix with government officials, since "many government officials are still skeptical and suspicious of NGOs." Edwar appealed for the international community to host more such events, to continue to build trust between civil society and government and to give NGOs important advocacy opportunities.

(U) Salma Jabbo, head of the Widows Training and Rehabilitation Center, said that the small grants program was especially helpful to smaller groups and those who work on vocational training. "These are programs that the international community just isn't funding now - they focus on training, but not on developing vocations," she said. She acknowledged that the grants were small and that she would still need to seek additional funding even if awarded one, but said that her organization is small enough that \$25,000 could keep it operating for three months, the length of time needed to complete a full training course.

(U) Although post initially debated about the decision to include both female and male participants, Ministry of Interior police officer Saad Mean, formerly of the MOI IG office, was glad that men were included on the guest list. He said, "there is still much to do, but these kinds of events will help to build social and cultural support for increased interaction between men and women who share the same goal: improving the situation for Iraqi women."

(U) All participants were encouraged to visit a table set up by Cultural Affairs where English and Arabic publications were displayed and distributed. Most attendees left with an armload of USG books, on topics from civic education to business English. One government official told poloff that he would take the books to his daughter, a high school student, to improve her English. Another NGO leader, who looked to have at least two copies of each publication, said that she would display them in the reception area and staff room of her organization, and would look over the materials to see what she could incorporate into her trainings.